

The Work of Anthony Downs

—With a Bibliography of his Work—

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At present, no one denies that government or politics plays a vital role in the economy. Government, both relatively and absolutely, is an extremely powerful institution today. It is urgent for us to devote more effort to the understanding of government behavior. This common observation is the starting point of this paper, and has been a challenge since the period in which it began to exist independently of politics as a discipline.

So far, economists have always admitted that government is there. They have devoted a great deal of thought to problems of the government's role in the economy. Nevertheless, as Anthony Downs has pointed out,¹⁾ economists almost always study the government in a detached and unintegrated way, and attempts to treat government as an endogenous variable are extremely rare. Only recently have a number of economists attempted to explore government behavior. We will propose two reasons for this. One reason stems from the ideologies of Laisser-Fair. Laisser-

1) Anthony Downs, *The Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper & Row., 1957
 "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy", *Journal of Political Economy*, April, 1957.

Fair led us to the image of cheap-government.²⁾ There was no need to describe in any detail how to do anything and it was not necessary to theorize about government. In discussing economic policy, economists regard proposed policy as being acceptable. Therefore, we can say that they are not concerned with the effect economic policy has on politics and that they do not want to know why certain policy is used in preference to others. Thus, economists have for the most part neglected to develop theories of government. This is the second reason.

However, a number of economists have felt obliged to shift their attention from the market mechanism to the political process, because of a steady increase in the economic function of government and the recognition that in actual fact, proposed policies have been modified or rejected in the political world. Some of them point out that a truly useful solution of the economic problem must be economic and political in nature, and emphasize the need today for an amalgamation of the two fields.³⁾ This amalgamation has been called "the recovery of polit-

2) J. Viner has stated that "the British governments familiar to Adam Smith were incompetent, inefficient, and consequently unable to promote public welfare through intervention in economic affairs". The Recent study on Smith and Mill points out their flexible view of political aspects and willingness to accept government. For there discussion, see J. Viners, "Adam Smith and Laisser-Fair", *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 35, No. 2 April, pp. 192-232; G.S.L. Tucker, *Progress and Profits in British Economic Thought: 1650-1850*, London, 1960; R. D. Freeman, "Adam Smith, Education and Laiser-Fair", *History of political Economy*, Spring Vo. 3 No. 1, 1969, p. 174

3) Kenneth E. Boulding, *Economics as a Science*, McGraw-Hill 1970, p. 77. Boulding states: "The interrelationship between political science and economics continues to be of great importance. Indeed, at the present time there is some question as to whether two sciences are showing signs of amalgamating again, perhaps into economic politics rather than into political economy".

ical economy", "public economy", "the study of public choice", "theory of social choice", and "economic theory of democracy" by different scholars. In this paper, we call these attempts "politicizing of economics" as a whole. The amalgamation may, on the other hand, bring out in the open the problem of choice and judgement. Whether government is too powerful or not powerful enough is a typical problem requiring choice and judgement. Economists admit the existence of governmental activities in a free market economy where it can improve efficiency - to redistribute income, to regulate competition, and to stabilize the general level of economic activity. They lead us to the "invisible hand" held by government with which the economy reaches pareto-optimality. There are points upon which everyone agrees, i. e., that government plays an important role in economics. However, if we consider the problem of whether government is either too powerful or not powerful enough, agreement is not very easy to obtain. For a simplistic overview, the conservatives argue that the role of the government should be much more limited. The radicals take the position that the government operates ultimately to serve the interest of the class which controls the society. Armed with these perspectives, both the conservatives and the radicals find the current role of government distasteful and view with alarm any trend towards increasing government influence. They agree that government is too powerful. The liberals, on the other hand, while admitting to some misguided policies, are optimistic about government. They suggest wide varieties of government actions to help solve social problems.

It should be emphasized that these judgements have been made in

terms of an ideological view of society. Thus, there is a fundamental difference between radical, liberal, and conservative views. The liberals and the conservatives contend that capitalist societies provide maximum freedom and that socialist countries infringe on personal liberties. Although it has become hard to tell a liberal from a conservative, the conservative is incredibly naive. As Milton Friedman says, "The power to do good is also the power to do harm,⁴⁾ provided the familiar dictum that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," is the warning cry of the conservatives. For the liberal, the government is justified in acting, especially because it incorporates the preferences of all the individuals and because it seeks to advance the interests of all the individuals. In contrast, the radical argues that capitalism forces a conflict between the aggregative wealth of society and the freedom of most individuals. To conservatives and liberals, the best system is known and what must be done is to find the variant between that system and the existing system, namely, that set of policies, which will ensure its continued viability. The radical's response is that within the existing system that is impossible: One cannot expect the problems to disappear unless the basic institutions themselves change. These arguments are those of judgement and choice. Joan Robinson contends that "We can describe the technical features of its operation in an objective way, but it is not possible to describe a system without having moral judgements creeping in. For to look at a system from the outside

4) Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, The University of Chicago Press, 1962,

implies that it is not the only possible system: in describing it we compare it with other actual or imagined systems. Difference implies choice, and choice implies judgement".⁵⁾

The ideological stances of individual writers - the radicals on one hand, conservatives in the middle, and liberals on the other hand - are often used synonymously with the terms "left", "middle", and "right", referring to the political spectrum. The ideological difference may be based on different views of the nature of man. As has been well developed by J. L. Talman, on the left, men are by nature endowed with an equality in natural virtue: On the right, they are not.⁶⁾ Given the subject matter of all the social sciences, it is not things but people, without which it is not possible to explain man.

With regard to the nature of man, economists have strange views. Despite the fact that practically all choices are actually made under conditions of ignorance and uncertainty, the economists, by assuming self-interest and rationality, are in a better position to understand human nature than other social scientists. Kenneth E. Boulding makes an interesting point: "economists regard themselves as smart and extraordinarily nice people." He states that "it (pareto-optimality) implies that there is no violence anywhere in the system.....likewise, that there is no benevolence.....it assumes selfishness,.....makes no difference to me where I perceive you, either as better off or worse off. Anything less descriptive of the human condition could hardly be imagined".⁷⁾ It, is, thus, this characteristic of the economist that leads us to claim that

5) Joan Robinson, *Economic Philosophy*, C. A. Watts & Co. LTD, 1962, p. 14

6) J. L. Talman, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, Secker, 1952, pp. 6-7.

7) Kenneth E. Boulding, *Economics as a Science*, Mc Graw-Hill. p. 130

economics as a positive science is ethically, and therefore politically neutral.

What are the policy recommendations of a neutral political attitude? Strangely enough, economists recognize that government exerts a significant influence on the distribution of income, and that the distribution of income is determined not in the market, but through governmental action. They criticize the fact that the unequal distribution of income becomes the product of bad government rather than of the economic system. Their traditional approach is to define the conditions for individual welfare maximization in terms of pareto-optimal solutions and to explore the possibilities for attaining such an optimum. However the formal machinery for doing this does not ordinarily exist, and economists are generally highly critical of the major political mechanisms for attempting to accomplish this purpose. To be sure, it cannot be claimed that welfare economics has solved or even looks likely to solve the perennial difficulties raised by competing preferences. In spite of this struggle, the welfare economists' attempts have been a failure for reasonably glorious reasons, that is, pareto optimum describes the characteristics of a change, but does not relate directly to the characteristics of a situation or state either before or after change. It is, thus, inadequate for the solution of many policy problems, especially the distribution of wealth among the members of the society. It is, however, impossible to discuss policy without some criteria for selecting social action. Is there a normative principle superior to pareto optimum, in the sense that it implies that no one should be worse off? The question becomes that of asking what is the formal machinery for doing this.

Joan Robinson, who sharply points out the vagueness of neutral policy, questions: "What is neutral policy? What mixture of these means is it that leaves private enterprise unaffected in content and act only on the quantity?"⁽⁸⁾ There is no simple right policy and there is no neutral policy. It is all a matter of judgement. As we know, economists are concerned with the economic policy supplemented by government in areas where public goods, external economics or diseconomics exist. The need for government supplementation gives rise to the question of what neutral policy is, and fundamentally the attitudes of economics may be questionable. Thus, Kenneth E. Boulding says: "There are many political decisions, which have to be made, which do in fact involve interpersonal comparisons when in fact we do. Indeed the paretian optimum itself involves interpersonal comparisons of a kind in the sense that it makes what is essentially a value judgement when it implies that no person should be worse off".⁽⁹⁾ Leaving aside the people who are satisfied with the tautological framework, we recognize that theory and practice go together and that theory emerges from practice, that is, to solve practical problems.

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As mentioned above, economists are now producing works on the amalgamation between economic and political disciplines. An important contribution towards the achievement of this amalgamation is, as we will examine below, the political approach, which uses the methods and

8) Joan Robinson, *ibid*, pp. 97-98

9) Kenneth E. Boulding, *ibid*, p. 92

theories of economics to analyze political phenomena. While the political approach has a long intellectual history, it has been used explicitly by a large number of scholars only recently.⁽¹⁰⁾ William C. Mitchell, a political scientist, states: "A new interdisciplinary field is emerging that links the subject matter of political science with the methods and theories of economics. No name as yet has been institutionalized to designate this field."⁽¹¹⁾ He claims to call this movement "new political economy." Anthony Downs is one of these economists and is concerned with the failure of economic theory to deal adequately with the role of government in economic matters. Downs' intent is to provide a theory of political action based on economic principles, capable of empirical testing, to discover which form of political behavior is rational for the government and citizens of a democracy. Downs attempts this task by means of a model and analyzes the operation of a party system of government in terms of the attempts of party politicians to maximize votes, analogous to the behavior of firms in attempting to maximize profits. Although the theme is "politics," Downs' method is the application of economic principles based primarily on the self-interest axiom to the political process. Thus, we are offered an economic, not a political model.

The methodology of modelbuilding and formation of a theory of political action based on economic principles are criticized by some people. These criticisms, according to Downs, have something in common: ".....A theory of political action based on economic principles

10) For summary of work in this area, see Robert L. Bish, *The Public Economy of Metropolitan Areas*, Markham publishing company, 1972:

11) William C. Mitchell, "The New Political Economy", *Social Research*, 35, Spring, 1968, p. 77

and containing only self-interested actors can not explain those crucial political decisions.....”(12)

Why does Downs pay so much attention to the “self-interest motive of government”? To be sure, economists have been concerned with the role of government in the economy and have paid attention to problems of government policy, and in particular, to the questions of proper allocation of resources between public and private sectors. However, as Gordon Tullock points out, “little attention has been given to the actual process of decisionmaking”(13) Why have economists ignored this problem? It seems that this is theory that Downs starts in developing in “*Economic Theory of Democracy*.”

Downs proposes the following three reasons why economists have ignored the problem of government motivations :

- (1) Economists left the explanation of government's motives to political theorists.
- (2) Rousseau's ideas fostered the view that governments in a democracy have no real existence apart from the ‘will of the people.’
- (3) Economists have concentrated their attention upon the problems of defining social welfare.(14)

Economists assume that the men who run government are perfectly altruistic in their roles as producers. As a result, economists could treat the government as a machine that carries out the will of the people

12) Anthony Downs, “The public interest: It's meaning in a Democracy”, *Social Research*, Spring, 1962. p. 1

13) Gordon Tullock, “Problems of Majority Voting”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 1957. p. 571

14) Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 293

rather than an institution run by men. Economists have failed to explain the problem of government motivation, and therefore, have failed to take into account the political realities of government decision making.

Obviously, government is run by men and all men must be privately motivated to carry out their social functions. The structural relation between the function of government and the motives of those who run it, is a crucial determinant of its behavior. It is unreasonable for any economist to set forth a whole theory of government behavior without showing how the individual motives influence their political decisions.

The main sources of a political approach are welfare economy and public finance. The welfare economy is traditionally concerned with the question of "efficiency", "decision rules," or "criteria" for the maximization of social welfare function, and shifts its concern to political aspects concerned with social choice.⁽¹⁵⁾ In regard to this point, Kenneth J. Arrow proposes: In a capitalist democracy there are essentially two methods by which social choices can be made: voting, typically used to make political decisions, and the market mechanism typically used to make economic decisions."⁽¹⁶⁾ As public finance has questioned how large a government budget should be or how budget expenditures should be allocated between ends, the fiscal decision process or collective choice has been a central concern. James M. Buchanan argues: How should fiscal systems be organized? These emerge from a very complex political structure in which many participants are involved and on several

15) Kenneth J. Arrow and Tibor Scitovsky, *Reading in Welfare Economics*, Richard D. Irwin, 1967 pp. 113~198

16) Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social choice and Individual Values*, John Wiley & Sons, 1951 p. 1

levels. The fiscal process cannot be diverged from the political structure.⁽¹⁷⁾

The major concerns of the political approach seem to be: (1) government rather than the market mechanism must provide public goods and services, (2) voting is a technique through which individuals can reveal their preferences, (3) the voting process and market mechanism are alternative methods for arriving at social decisions.⁽¹⁸⁾ Strictly speaking the political approach examined here can be fundamentally divided into two parts. The differences may emerge from two distinct views of democracy and from the question of how political decisions are to be made. One approach is based on individualistic self-interest. Individual voters are the basic determinants in the democratic society, and the voting process is synonymous with the political process. This approach analyzes the implication that collective decisions are concerned with social choice. It is a study of how a community composed of citizens with diverse preference patterns reaches a social choice through voting. "The Impossibility Theorem" contended by Arrow is the most outstanding work of this theory. The first approach is primarily concerned with the internal logic of collective decisions toward model-building, and will be called here the "rationality approach." Anthony Downs is close to this approach.

The "organic" approach called by Buchanan does not take the individualistic self-interest premise into account.⁽¹⁹⁾ This approach is concerned with explaining social rationality rather than rationality in

17) James M. Buchanan, *The Public Finance*, Richard D. Irwin, 1970

18) For a discussion of this point, see Otto A. Davis and George H. Hanies, "A Political Approach to a Theory of Public Expenditure," *The National Tax Journal*, september, 1966. pp. 259~275

19) James M. Buchanan, "The Pure Theory of Government Finance: A Suggested Approach", *Journal of Political Economy*, December, 1949. pp. 496~505

individual behavior. Thus, this approach makes no assumptions about individual maximizing behavior, but instead postulates simply that there are in existence institutions and organizations for the expression of social ethics and for the implementation of social action. This approach to political decisions has been most fully elaborated by C. F. Lindblom.⁽²⁰⁾ For him, it would appear that what is maximized is simply agreement. Public policy is not viewed in terms of welfare maximization. The proper concern of policy-making is the process of reaching agreement. The public decision process, in Lindblom's view, must therefore be viewed as a "play of power" in which policy analysis is one of the instruments or a game in which policy analysis is one of the instruments or weapons. This approach loses in elegant analysis, but gains in realism.⁽²¹⁾

It is evident that the economic approach of politics substantially simplifies the complexity of real world decisions. In criticism of this, John C. Harsanyi states ; "it is an equally clearly established empirical fact that many important aspects of everyday economic and political behavior cannot be explained in terms of this over simple theory of human motivation. Even in economic life, many aspects of people's behavior cannot be explained without recognizing that many individuals are motivated partly by noneconomic and /or nonegoistic motives"⁽²²⁾ As Downs mentions, we do not have the means to imply that every economist

20) Robert Dahl and Charles F. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Welfare*, New York: Harper, 1953. *The Intelligence of Democracy*, New York: The Free Press, 1965. *The Policy Making process*, Prentice-Hall, 1965

21) My source of this, Jesse Burkhead and Jerry Miner, *Public Expenditure*, Macmillan, 1971, p. 163

22) John C. Harsanyi, "Rational-Choice Models of Political Behavior vs. Functionalist and Conformist Theories," *World Politics*, No4, July, 1969, p. 519

must also be a political theorist. When discussing a particular society, we should not take its political structure as given. Any attempts to construct a theory of governmental economic action cannot succeed without discussing the motives of those people who run the government. Thus, we must take into account the motives of its operation and the nature of its structure. It may be said that the economic approach to politics is superior to older political theories.

3

So far, we have emphasized that government is an extremely powerful institution in economic society and is now accepted as being one of the primary influences determining which way our economic society will go. Thus, we should devote efforts to understanding the government mechanism. We may be in a very weak position, because we have treated government as "given," and have for the most part neglected to develop a theory of government behavior. However, we should spell out a theory of government²³⁾ in the way that we spelled out a theory of firms by recognizing that a firm is not only an economic institution maximizing profit, but is a complex social organism with sociological, psychological and political aspects.

It is necessary, however, to note that we neither underestimate market function nor overestimate government function. When we consider F. Von Hayek's argument of "economic calculus",²⁴⁾ the true

23) An interesting discussion in this regard is found in: Roland McKean, "The Unseen Hand in Government," *American Economic Review*, June, 1965 pp. 496~505

24) F. Von Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review*, September 1945 pp. 17~31

function of the market mechanism becomes an indispensable subject which we continue to pursue. However, we also have Boulding's comment that "changes in the price structure will affect not only who does what, when and where, but also who gets what, when, and where".²⁵⁾ It is obvious that the economic problem of society is not merely a problem of how to allocate given resources. Thus, the actual political decision process is also an indispensable subject we should pursue.

What and how many things about government are we able to learn from political science? From Mitchell's statement, "detailed descriptions of the processes and countless examples are cited in support of the theory, but no test is made of actual policy choice by the government,"²⁶⁾ We are provided with a highly plausible theory, but no systematic evidence concerning government mechanism. To be sure, as W. G. Runciman states, it is seldom easy in a given society or even an organization to find out the actual holders of power. It is almost impossible to say who has more or less power than someone else.²⁷⁾ However, it seems to be quite true that political scientists have not answered the question of what are the general theoretical principles by which bargaining should be governed.

We find the trends are towards politicizing of economics. Economists devote their energies to analysis of the political process, especially the voting process by which public decisions are made. As was to be

25) Kenneth E. Boulding, *Economics as Science*, McGraw-Hill, p. 81

26) William C. Mitchell, "The New Political Economy", *Social Research*, 35, Spring, 1968

27) W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1963 p. 80

expected, it has been challenged by economists, but there are a few political scientists who are concerned with this work.²⁸⁾ The politicizing of economics, as Aarom Wildavsky states, includes fundamental problems on the difference between political rationality and economic rationality.²⁹⁾

Both economists and political scientists seem to face the following problem. A free election system is indispensable in democratic society, but the tremendous increase in political expenses is a cause for what appears to be the collapse of the democratic society's election system. Since elections are the only legal means to get power in the democratic society, politicians increasingly waste energy and money to win seats at election time. Political parties are eager to fabricate political myths to control government. The gap between government "promise" and actual "accomplishments" is giving rise to increased frustration in the democratic society. In this regard, an idea of our time is how we can best describe and explain what goes on within the political process. Our emphasis here rests on the conviction that an effective criteria of desirable policies can be best developed when there is a clear realization of the potentials and limitations of the political context in which they must be applied. That we should argue for any one of the conflicting views which can be held will require the maximum possible use of our knowledge, whether formal or empirical, about how politics does work. In regard to this idea, we are convinced that Down's study gives us many of suggestions with which to understand the political process.

28) For example, see David Easton, *Varieties of Political Theory*, Prentice-Hall, 1966

29) Aarom Wildavsky, "The Political Economy of Efficiency," *The Public Interest*, 8, Summer, 1967 pp. 39~48

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* Anthony Downs received a bachelor of arts degree, summa cum laude, in political theory and international relations from Carleton College in 1952 and a doctor of philosophy degree in economics from Stanford University in 1956.

As you will see in his bibliography, his primary focus in recent years has been urban problem-solving. I very much appreciate Downs for sending his bibliography, and am truly convinced that this bibliography contributes to Downs' studies.

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